



**DECLARATION**  
*ON*

# **BUILDING UNIVERSAL SOCIAL PROTECTION IN THE ARAB REGION**



**Arab Region Hub  
for Social Protection**

**ENSUING FROM**

The hybrid focal meeting on “Expanding Social Protection in Times of Crisis: Challenges, Opportunities, and Spaces for Collaboration”

**WHICH WAS ORGANIZED BY**

The Arab Region Hub for Social Protection

**AND TOOK PLACE**

in Beirut-Lebanon and online  
on 30 June 2022.

## PREAMBLE

We, the organizations and individuals whose names are listed at the end of this declaration,

Having met in Beirut and online on 30 June 2022 to deliberate on how to expand social protection in the Arab region in times of crisis,

Having discussed the need for closer collaboration to address gaps in social protection work in the region and having reached a broad consensus on key concepts, perspectives, notions, and priorities,

Reaffirming the content of the [Ministerial Forum Declaration](#) on “The Future of Social Protection in the Arab Region: Building a Vision for a Post-Covid-19 Reality” adopted on 30 November 2021, and seeking to build upon it and to use it to hold the signatory States accountable,

Adopting the [International Labour Organization \(ILO\)’s Social Protection Floors Recommendation 2012 \(No. 202\)](#) that builds upon the principles laid out in [ILO’s Social Security \(Minimum Standards\) Convention 1952 \(No. 102\)](#),

### PROCLAIM THAT:

## WHO WE ARE

### *Principle 1*

We are a community of practice and knowledge on social protection in the Arab region. One that builds on the existing ecosystem, solidifies it, and expands it. One that has a coordinated vision and that strives to turn the duplication of efforts into dialogue, exchange, partnerships, and cooperation in order to join forces, make a stronger impact, and ultimately achieve our shared goals.

### *Principle 2*

Our joint mission as a community of practice and an epistemic community is to:

- Produce and disseminate knowledge on social protection in the Arab region. Knowledge that is both evidence-based and policy-oriented. Knowledge that is homegrown and locally produced. Knowledge that is produced based on a multi-disciplinary, mixed-method, and multi-lingual approach.
- Advocate the research findings and consequent policy recommendations on the local, national, regional, and global levels via existing and new, and innovative advocacy channels.
- Benefit from inter-regional cross-fertilization, South-South, South-North, and triangular exchange, and international advocacy mechanisms such as those made available by international financial institutions (IFIs), and international and regional organizations.

- Educate the general public about their rights and the concepts related to social protection. Raise their awareness, build their capacity, and create a clear set of demands related to social protection on their part, with a view of shaping public opinion and promoting a public narrative in this regard.
- Mobilize social movements, trade and labor unions, political parties, and collective action more broadly, on issues related to social protection reforms, including through raising the awareness and building the capacity of young activists, scholars, and small/grassroots CSOs, and equipping them with the needed research findings and policy recommendations.

### **Principle 3**

Our community of practice and knowledge operates based on the following fundamentals:

- We commit to engaging in a continuous space for dialogue – both virtual and in-person – among each other in order to share ideas, research findings, updates, challenges, priorities, opportunities, and – more importantly – success stories, lessons learned, and best practices.
- We agree to build on this declaration in order to converge – to the extent possible – towards a shared narrative, discourse, understanding, cause, and analysis while respecting each other's identities and views, and while leveraging the value added in our heterogeneity.
- We recognize the importance of capitalizing on our differences in terms of research methods, disciplines, perspectives, ideologies, and diverse ways of doing business, in strengthening our complementarity.
- We opt for a coordination mechanism that is decentralized, horizontal, and flexible to allow for autonomy and proactivity, knowing our organizational interdependence. Our level of structural maturity can evolve as we move forward based on the prospects foreseen by the great majority of the members of our community.
- We understand the importance of trust, transparency, the division of labor, the phasing of our development as a community, and the respect of each other's agencies, prerogatives, and areas of specialization, for the sustainability of our partnership.
- We confirm that our shared purpose is at the center of our partnership rather than any individual/organization of us, that no one should speak on behalf of the other, and that no one should block the progress of the community's work.

## OUR SOCIAL PROTECTION AGENDA

### *Principle 4*

Our approach to social protection is a human rights-based one. We, therefore, consider social protection to be the primary responsibility of the State, and a manifestation of the social contracts that tie citizens and residents to their States. We reject the humanitarian assistance approach to social protection whereby it is primarily considered to be an aid mechanism or a service, meaning it is not predictable for the population. We insist that all actors providing humanitarian assistance in times of crisis and emergency, notably local, national, and international non-governmental organizations, UN agencies, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), as well as private actors and the private sector, ensure that the aid they provide is complementary to the existing social protection schemes, is fully integrated where possible, and covers recipients that are excluded from existing schemes. We also recognize that, when this model is not possible, humanitarian service providers have a role to play in advocating for universal human rights-based social protection.

### *Principle 5*

We envision universal social protection systems with social protection floors which offer basic social security guarantees to all residents and not only citizens regardless of whether they can contribute or not [horizontal coverage]. These guarantees ensure that, as a minimum, over the life cycle, every person, including those in need, has access to essential health care and to basic income security, which together secure effective access to goods and services defined as necessary. The income security component of social protection floors is provided through social grants to all people facing lifecycle contingencies such as children, those of working age, and the elderly, as well as to those facing different social risks and vulnerabilities. Social protection floors, which are mostly non-contributory, must be accompanied with mandatory social insurance and social security benefits of guaranteed levels to those who can contribute, and with optional/voluntary insurance of even higher guaranteed levels under government regulations to those who need it and can afford it [vertical coverage].

### *Principle 6*

We call for social protection systems that are effective, inclusive, and sustainable. For that, our States need to revamp our current systems to be able to build a solid infrastructure (legal, institutional, programmatic, etc.) that allows us to expand social protection to those excluded and left behind, whether due to the lack of data (disaggregated macro or microdata, census data, unified social registries), the exclusion in the delivery systems, deliberate exclusion from legal frameworks, or self-exclusion. Exclusion often affects typical forms of vulnerability, new forms of vulnerability or forms that arise with specific crises, and invisible forms of vulnerability that we can find in different marginalized and remote ecosystems of our countries.

### *Principle 7*

We believe that social protection systems are not enough on their own to achieve social equality and social justice. These aims need new economic models and development paradigms that abide by all the pillars and goals of the Agenda 2030/SDGs, and where all public policies and legal

frameworks are just and responsive to the different forms of social vulnerability. It is only then that our desired social protection systems can be complementary enough and thus effective. Social protection should also be thought of throughout all the pillars/goals of the development agenda.

### **Principle 8**

Labor programs for employment creation/activation and social safety net programs such as cash transfers, food assistance, and in-kind donations can, in turn, only come to complement the universal social protection systems we aspire to, especially in crisis times, to help the most hard-hit cope faster until price and wage adjustments take place.

### **Principle 9**

Financing our desired social protection systems should happen mainly through an internal redistribution of wealth and public resources rather than through merely or predominantly sovereign debt, be it external or domestic. When debt is necessary, its architecture must ensure: i) a fair and progressive distribution of its burden among the different social/income classes, ii) that it is not insolvent or largely intergenerational, and iii) that it does not impair public finance sustainability. In other terms, we need to adopt financing schemes that abide by the development effectiveness principles and go along with [this statement](#) on the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA) on Financing for Development (FfD).

- Options, depending on context, include reallocating, re-prioritizing, or rationalizing public expenditures, increasing tax revenues progressively for government/tax-financed schemes, using the reductions of debt or debt servicing, etc.
- Before being redistributed, public financial resources need to be augmented by taxing personal/corporate wealth (e.g. capital gain tax, real estate tax) as well as by stopping illicit financial flows (IFFs), tax dodging/avoidance/evasion, weak tax collection mechanisms, unnecessary tax incentives, embezzled and misappropriated public resources due to corruption, and other leakages in public financial resources.
- Financing universal social security coverage ideally combines: i) non-contributory/tax-financed schemes that allow the inclusion of the unemployed, the poorest, informal labor, and refugees, among others; and ii) contributory revenues, following the welfare State model of internal redistribution of wealth among the currently living population, whereby those working finance those who do not and the richest finance the poorest – both of which emanate from the concept of solidarity financing.

### **Principle 10**

More studies are needed on the political economy of social protection in the Arab region and how the policy-politics divide can be bridged. The change we aspire to on the level of social protection systems is radical as it entails structural changes in the economic models, the development paradigms, and the States' approaches to social justice. Therefore, what we are aiming for requires a serious political change coupled with a political will to improve. As this is a very ambitious and long-term journey, we need to think of how to incrementally make the necessary policy reforms and the needed small but sustainable steps in the short-medium run. Questions that fall under this umbrella:

- Is the change actually possible from within?
- What has been the role of IFIs and the international donor community in maintaining political

and socio-economic inequalities in place in our countries? How do we promote accountability and partnership across these actors?

- What has the role of the State been [a historical projection from the past to the present]? What do we want from the State?
- How to overcome our weak governments (when applicable), weak governance, and weak public institutions in order to advance our State-led/centric vision for Arab social protection systems?
- What are the democratic and participatory implementation mechanisms and frameworks that we need? What are the transparency and accountability mechanisms, follow-up, monitoring and evaluation processes, and e-government and open government transformations that we need?
- What are the political redlines impacting our States' decisions with respect to who to include or not, and to what forms of social security to activate or keep dormant? How to break these redlines?
- How are structural power dynamics excluding citizens from the democratic and decision-making processes? [an intersectional analysis]
- What role are political parties, faith-based organizations, and clientelism playing? How are they preventing social protection from being a public cause/issue?
- How related is our social protection vision to social democracy, political bargaining and contestation, contentious politics, and the notion of civil peace?

### **Principle 11**

We need and aspire to examine the political sociology of social protection by:

- Mapping, documenting, and analyzing the social movements/activism related to social protection.
- Working with, supporting, and – when possible – mobilizing these social movements, as well as trade and labor unions and political parties (traditional and alternative/independent).
- Working with and mobilizing the “allies of the marginalized”, creating a public demand narrative, a continuous space for dialogue, and an ecosystem for partnership and cooperation.
- Promoting the right to mobilize and organize and creating an ecosystem for collective action more broadly where impacted communities are able to express themselves directly and spearhead their own grassroots movements.
- Understanding how to take advantage of political, economic, and social moments.
- Understanding and proposing ways to overcome the counter-revolution tools that have been leading to social implosion and consequent social inertia in Arab countries. These tools include the invisible or subtle strategies of the regimes that we cannot directly point out and tackle.
- Understanding the role being played by media.
- Examining ways to politicize the people and thus bring policies back to them, so that they become the decision-makers and the governments only activate their decisions.

### **Principle 12**

We need and aspire to bridge the gap between fundamental scientific research (including action-based research) and practitioners/policy research, as well as think of ways to decolonize our research methodologies and localize our knowledge production for more authentic results. This also allows to expand the discussion on social protection beyond the circles of experts and to join these experts with the practitioners and the vulnerable groups themselves, which promises a stronger impact.

- We need not only to redefine vulnerability but to also think of new ways to measure it and of new quantifying indicators that speak to both policymakers and vulnerable groups.
- We need to be conscious of the several challenges that emanate from the vulnerable communities themselves, such as the stigma they are subject to and their usual instrumentalization, which have led to the lack of trust on their part toward the researchers and practitioners trying to help them and to their self-exclusion from different research/policy processes, etc.
- We need to explore the best ways to join scientific research (necessary to tackle structural issues) and practitioners research (of high temporality importance), and to link this analysis to the rhythm of publication (what is published when) and the typology of authors and readers (who writes on what, who reads what).
- We need to think of ways to tackle the lack of data (micro and macro, weak disaggregation, not centralized, not stored in systematic databases, not accessible, or not timely).
- We need to think of alternative targeting mechanisms and to advance clear and objective distribution criteria/standards for universal social protection systems (who gets social assistance and how much of it, who gets social insurance, etc.).

### **Principle 13**

We acknowledge the need to implement our agenda in line with national priorities while accounting for context-specificities, crises, the progressive realization of goals, and the different capacities and resources.



## SIGNATORIES

*Names are listed in alphabetical order*

### Organizations

**Arab NGO Network for Development**

**Arab Reform Initiative**

**Arab Watch Coalition**

**Centre for Social Sciences Research and Action**

**Daraj Media - Lebanon**

**Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights - Egypt**

**Espace Associatif - Morocco**

**Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux**

**Inkyfada - Tunisia**

**Lebanese Observatory for the Rights of Workers and Employees**

**Mada Masr - Egypt**

**NIDAA Development Organization - Sudan**

**Oxfam in MENA**

**Phenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies - Jordan**

**Tammuz Social Development Organization - Iraq**

**The Policy Initiative (TPI) - Lebanon**

### Individuals

**Bashir Osmat**, *Expert in Social Protection*

**Howaida Adly Roman**, *Professor of Political Science, National Center for Social Research*

**Medani Abbas Medani**, *Sudanese Political Economist and Activist*

**Mohamad Bani Amer**, *Social Protection Expert, and Social Protection Technical Specialist at the Arab Trade Union Confederation (ATUC)*

**Rana Jawad**, *Co-founder and Convener, MENA Social Policy (MENASP) Network at Bath University*

**Said Issa**, *Expert in Social Dialogue and Social Protection in the Arab Region*

## **About the Arab Region Hub for Social Protection**

We are a space in and through which professionals dedicated to exploring, understanding and advocating for better social protection in the Arab region exchange ideas and explore and initiate collaborative action. We envision an Arab region in which all people, regardless of their identities, are guaranteed social protections that secure their access to the essential goods and services needed to ensure their well-being and decent standards of living, which in turn gives them the opportunity to prosper and contribute as active members of society. We aim to facilitate the development of equitable and sustainable social protection systems in the region by: executing, encouraging and facilitating the production, analysis, collation, and dissemination of interdisciplinary knowledge about the topic; facilitating dialogue within professional spheres and awareness raising among the wider public; and enhancing collective action that amplifies advocacy efforts with the different stakeholders and decisionmakers.